Manning the navy. From an old print.

The press gang seizing a victim.

Jack in the Bilboes. From the painting by Morland.

ENGLAND'S PRESS GANGS GAVE HER MASTERY OF THE SEA

The Terrors of the Brutal Impress System Which Tore Men From Their Families and Made Them Into Wonderful Fighters—Existed for More Than 100 Years

The impress system of securing sailors for the British navy was probably the most dreaded institution of its period. Unlawful, oppressive and unjust, it was nevertheless tolerated and fostered for more than a hundred years. Standing as a bulwark against aggression and conquest, it ground under its heel the very people it protected, making them slaves in order to keep them free. Masquerading as a protector it dragged the wage earner from his home and left his starving family to the mercies of the parish. The story of these wrongs is told in a book by J. R. Hutchinson, just published by E. P. Dutton & Co.

By J. R. HUTCHINSON.

THE root of the necessity that seized the British sailor and made of him what he in time became, the most abject creature and the most efficient fighting unit the world has ever produced, lay in the fact that he was island born.

In that island a great and vigorous people had sprung into being—a people great in their ambitions, commerce and dominion; vigorous in holding what they had won against the assaults, meditated or actual, of those who envied their greatness and coveted their possessions. Of this island people, as of their worldwide interests, the "chiefest defence" was a "good fleet at sea."

The Peace of Utrecht, marking though it did the close of the protracted war of the Spanish succession, brought to the island kingdom not peace, but a sword; for although its navy was as unrivalled as its commerce and empire, the supreme struggle for existence, under the guise of the mastery of the sea, was only just begun. Decade after decade, as that struggle waxed and waned but went remorselessly on, the navy grew in ships, the ships in tonnage and weight of metal, and with their growth the demand for men, imperative as the very existence of the nation, mounted ever higher and higher. In 1756 fifty thousand sufficed for the nation's needs. By 1780 the number had reached ninety-two thousand; and with 1802 it touched highwater mark in the unprecedented total of one hundred and twenty-nine thousand men.

In his endeavors to escape the gang the sailor resembled nothing so much as that hopelessly impotent fugitive the flying fish. For both the sea swarmed with enemies bent on catching them. Both sought to evade those enemies by flight, and both, their ineffectual flight ended, returned to the sea again whether they would or not. It was their fate, a deep sea kismet as unavoidable as death.

The ultimate destination of the sailor who by strategy or accident succeeded in ending the triple line of sea gangs so placed as to head him off from the coast was thus never in doubt. His longest flights were those he made on land, for here the broad horizon that stood the gangs in such good stead at sea was measurably narrower, while hiding places abounded and were never far to seek. All the same, in spite of these adventitious aids to self-effacement, the predestined end of the seafaring man sooner or later overtook him. The gang met him at the turning of the ways and wiped him off the face of the land. In the expressive words of a naval officer who knew the conditions thoroughly well, the sailor's chances of obtaining a good run for his money "were not worth a chaw of tobacco."

For this inevitable finish to all the sailor's attempts at flight on shore there existed in the main two reasons. The first of these lay in the sailor himself, making of him an unconscious aider and abettor in his own capture. Just as love and a cough cannot be hid, so there was no disguising the fact that the sailor was a sailor. He was marked by characteristics that infallibly betrayed him. His bandy legs and rolling gait suggested irresistibly the way of a ship at sea, and no "soaking" in alehouse or tavern could eliminate the salt from the peculiar oaths that were as natural to him as the breath of life. Assume what disguise he would, he fell under suspicion at sight, and he had only to open his mouth to turn that suspicion into certainty. It needed no Sherlock Holmes of a gangsman to divine what he was or whence he came.

The second reason why the sailor could never long escape the gangs was because the gangs were numerically too many for him. It was no question of a chance gang here and there. The country swarmed with them.

Take the coast. Here every seaport of any pretensions in the way of trade, together with every spot between such ports known to be favored or habitually used for the homing sailor as a landing place, with certain exceptions already noted, either had its own particular gang or was closely watched by some gang stationed within easy access of the spot. In this way the whole island was ringed in by gangs on shore, just as it was similarly ringed in by other gangs afloat.

"If their lordships would give me au[illegible] here," says Lieut. [illegible] from

In this modest request the lieutenant states the whole case for the land gang, at once demonstrating its utility and defining its functions. Unconsciously he does more. He echoes a cry that incessantly assailed the ears of admiralty: "The sailor has escaped! Send us warrants and give us gangs, and we will catch him yet."

It was this call, the call of the fleet, that dominated the situation and forced order out of chaos. The men must be "rose," and only one method could do it. The demand was a heavy one to make upon the most unsystematic system ever known, yet it survived the ordeal. The coast was mapped out, warrants were despatched to this point and that, rendezvous were opened, gangs formed. No effort or outlay was spared to take the sailor the moment he got ashore, or very soon after.

In this systematic setting of land traps that vast head centre of the nation's overseas trade, the metropolis, naturally had first place. The streets, and especially the waterside streets, were infested with gangs. At times it was unsafe for any able-bodied man to venture abroad unless he had on him an undeniable protection or wore a dress that unmistakably proclaimed the gentleman. The general rendezvous was on Tower Hill, but as ships completing their complement nearly always sent a gang or two to London, minor rendezvous abounded. St. Katherine's by the Tower was specially favored by them. The Rotterdam Arms and the Two Dutch Skippers, well known taverns within that precinct, were seldom without the bit of bunting that proclaimed the headquarters of the gang. At Westminister the White Swan in King's street usually bore a similar decoration, as did also the Ship in Holborn.

A characteristic case of pressing by a gang using the last named house occurred in 1706. Ransacking the town in quest of pressable subjects of Her Majesty, they came one day to the "Cock and Rummer" in Bow street, where a big dinner was in progress. Here nothing would suit their tooth but mine host's apprentice, and as ill luck would have it the apprentice was cook to the establishment and responsible for the dinner. Him they nevertheless seized and would have hurried away in spite of his master's supplications, protests and offers of free drinks, had it not been for the fact that a mob collected and forcibly prevented them. Other gangs hurrying to the assistance of their hard pressed comrades—to the number, it is said, of sixty men—a free fight ensued, in the course of which a burly constable, armed with a formidable long-staff, was singled out by the original gang, doubtless on account of the prominent part he took in the fray, as a fitting substitute for the apprentice. By dint of beating the poor fellow till he was past resistance they at length got him to the "Ship," where they were in the very act of bundling him into a coach, with the intention of carrying him to the water side below bridge and of their putting him on board the press smack, when in the general confusion he somehow effected his escape. Such incidents were common enough not only at that time but long after.

At Gravesend sailors came ashore in such numbers from East India and other ships as to keep a brace of gangs busy. Another found enough to do at Broadstairs, whence a large number of vessels sailed in the Iceland cod fishery and similar industries. Faversham was a port and had its gang, and from Margate right away to Portsmouth, and from Portsmouth to Plymouth, nearly every town of any size that offered ready hiding to the fugitive sailor from the Channel was similarly favored.

To record in these pages the locality of all the gangs that were stationed in this manner upon the seaboard of the kingdom would be as undesirable as it is foreign to the scope of this chapter. Enough to repeat that the land, always the sailor's objective in eluding the triple cordon of seaborne gangs, was ringed in and surrounded by a circle of land gangs in every respect identical with that described as hedging the southern coast, and in its continuity almost as unbroken as the shore itself. Both sea gangs and coast gangs were amphibious, using either land or sea at pleasure.

Inland the conditions were the same, yet materially different. What was on the coast an encircling line assumed here the form of a vast net, to which the principal towns, the great cross-roads and the arterial bridges of the [illegible] the relation of reticu[illegible] the constant "ranging" [illegible] direction, now in that, supplied the connecting filaments or threads. The gangs composing this great inland net were not amphibious. Their most desperate aquatic ventures were confined to rivers and canals. Ability to do their twenty miles a day on foot counted for more with them than a knowledge of how to handle an oar or distinguish the "cheeks" of a gaff from its "jaw."

Just as the sea gangs in their raids upon the land were the Danes and "creekmen" of their time, so the land gangsman was the true highwayman of the century that begot him. He kept every strategic point of every main thoroughfare, held all the bridges, watched all the ferries, haunted all the fairs. No place where likely men were to be found escaped his calculating eye.

He was an inveterate early riser, and sailors sauntering to the fair for want of better employment ran grave risks. In this way a large number were taken on the road to Croydon fair one morning in September, 1743. For actual pressing the fair itself was unsafe because of the great concourse of people; but it formed one of the best possible hunting grounds and was kept under close observation for that reason. Here the gangsman marked his victim, whose steps he dogged into the country when his business was done or his pleasure ended, never for a moment losing sight of him until he walked into the trap all ready set in some wayside spinny or beneath some sheltering bridge.

Bridges were the inland gangsman's favorite haunt. They not only afforded ready concealment, they had to be crossed. Thus Lodden Bridge near Reading, accounted one of the "likeliest places in the country for straggling seamen," was seldom without its gang. Nor was the great bridge at Gloucester, since, as the first bridge over the Severn, it drew to itself all the high roads and their users from Wales and the north. To sailors making for the south coast from those parts it was a point of approach as dangerous as it was unavoidable. Great numbers were taken here in consequence.

So of ferries. The passage boats at Queensferry on the Firth of Forth, watched by gangs from Inverkeithing, yielded almost as many men in the course of a year as the costly rendezvous at Leith. Greenock ferries proved scarcely less productive. But there was here an exception. The ferry between Glenfinart and Greenock plied only twice a week, and as both occasions coincided with market days the boat was invariably crowded with women. Only once did it yield a man. Peter Weir, the hand in charge, one day overset the boat, drowning every soul on board except himself. Thereupon the gang pressed him, arguing that one who used the sea so effectively could not fail to make a valuable addition to the fleet.

Inland towns traversed by the great highroads leading from north to south or from east to west were much frequented by the gangs. Among these Stonebridge, perhaps, ranked first. Situated midway between the great ports of Liverpool and Bristol, it easily and effectually commanded Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Bridgnorth, Bewdley, Kidderminster and other populous towns, while it was too small to afford secure hiding within itself. The gangs operating from Stourbridge brought in an endless procession of ragged and travel stained seamen.

From ports on the Bristol Channel to ports on the English Channel, and the reverse, many seamen crossed the country by stage coach or wagon, and to intercept them gangs were stationed at Okehampton, Liskeard and Exeter. Taunton and Salisbury also as "great thoroughfare to and from the west" had each its gang, and a sufficient number of sailors escaped the press at the latter place to justify the presence of another at Romsey. Andover had a gang as early as 1756, on the recommendation of no less a man than Rodney.

Shore gangs were of necessity ambulatory. To sit down before the rendezvous pipe in hand and expect the evasive sailor to come of his own accord and beg the favor of being pressed would have been a futile waste of time and tobacco. The very essence of the gangman's duty lay in the leg work he did. To that end he ate the king's victuals and wore the king's shoe leather. Consequently he was early afoot and late to bed. Ten miles out and ten home made up his daily constitutional, and if he saw fit to exceed that distance he did not incur his captain's displeasure. The gang at Reading, a strategic point of great importance on the Bath and Bristol road, traversed all the country round about within a radius of twenty miles—double the regulation distance. That at King's Lynn, another centre of unmeasured possibilities, trudged as far afield as Boston, Ely, Peterborough and Wells-on-Sea. And the Isle of Wight gang, stationed at Cowes or Ryde, now and then cooperated with a gang from Portsmouth or Gosport, and ranged the whole length and breadth of the island, which was a noted nest of deserters and skulkers. "Range," by the way, was a word much favored by the officers who led such expeditions. Its use is happy. It suggests the object well in view, the nicely calculated distance, the steady aim that seldom missed its mark. The gang that "ranged" rarely returned empty handed.

On these excursions the favorite resting place was some secluded nook overlooking the point of crossing of two or more highroads, the favorite place of refreshment some busy wayside alehouse. Both were good to rest or refresh in, for at both the chances of effecting a capture were far more numerous than on the open road.

The object of the gang in taking the road was not, however, so much what could be picked up by chance in the course of a day's march as the execution of some preconcerted design upon a particular person or place. This brings us to the methods of pressing commonly adopted, which may be roughly summarized under the three heads of surprise, violence and the hunt. Frequently all three were combined; but as in the case of gangs operating on the waters of rivers or harbors, the essential element in all prearranged raids, attacks and predatory expeditions was the first named element, surprise. In this respect the gangmen were genuine "Peep-o'-Day Boys." The siege of Brighton is a notable case in point.

The inhabitants of Brighton, better known in the days of the press gang as Brighthelmstone, consisted largely of fisher folk, in respect to whom the Admiralty had been guilty of one of its rare oversights. For generations no call was made upon them to serve the king at sea. This accidental immunity in course of time came to be regarded by the Brighton fisherman as his birthright, and the misconception bred consequences. For one thing, it made him intolerably saucy. He boasted that no impress officer had power to take him, and he backed up the boast by openly insulting and on more than one occasion violently assaulting the king's uniform. With all this he was a hardy, long lived, lusty fellow, and as his numbers were never thinned by that active corrector of an excessive birth rate, the press gang, he speedily overstocked the town. An energetic worker while his two great harvests of herring and mackerel held out, he was at other times indolent, lazy and careless of the fact that his numerous progeny burdened the rates. These unpleasing circumstances having been duly reported to the Admiralty, their Lordships decided that what the Brighton fisherman required to correct his lax principles and stiffen his backbone was a good hot press. They accordingly issued orders for an early raid to be made upon that promising nursery of man-o'-war's men.

The orders, which were of course secret, bore date the 3d of July, 1779, and were directed to Capt. Adams, who, as regulating officer at Shoreham, was likewise in charge of the gang at Newhaven, under Lieut. Bradley, and of the gang at Littlehampton under Lieut. Breedon. At Shoreham there was also a tender manned by an able crew. With these three gangs and the tender's crew at his back Alms determined to lay siege to Brighton and teach the fishermen there a lesson they should not soon forget. But first, in order to render the success of the project doubly sure, he enlisted the aid of Major-Gen. Sloper, commandant at Lewes, who readily consented to lend a company of soldiers to assist in the execution of the design.

These preparations were some little time in the making, and it was not until the Thursday immediately preceding the 24th of July that all was in readiness. On the night of that day, by preconcerted arrangement, the allied forces took the road—for the Littlehampton gang, a matter of some twenty miles—and at the first flush of dawn united on the outskirts of the sleeping town, where the soldiers were without loss of time so disposed as to cut off every avenue of escape. This done, the gangs split up and by devious ways, but with all expedition, concentrated their strength upon the quay, expecting to find there a large number of men making ready for the day's fishing. To their intense chagrin the quay was deserted. The night had been a tempestuous one, with heavy rain, and though the unfortunate gangsmen were soaked to the skin the fishermen all lay dry in bed. Hearing the wind and rain, not a man turned out.

By this time the few people who were abroad on necessary occasions had raised the alarm and on every hand were heard loud cries of "Press gang!" and the hurried barricading of doors. For ten hours "every man kept himself locked up and bolted." For ten hours Alms waited in vain upon the local justice of the peace for power to break and enter the fishermen's cottages. His repeated requests being refused, he was at length "under the necessity of quitting the town with only one man." So ended the siege of Brighton; but Bradley, on his way back to Newhaven, fell in with a gang of smugglers, of whom he pressed five. Brighton did not soon forget the terrors of that rain swept morning. For many a long day her people were "very shy and cautious of appearing in public." The salutary effects of the raid, however, did not extend to the fishermen it was indeed to benefit. They became more insolent than ever and a few years later marked their resentment of the attempt to press them by administering a sound thrashing to Midshipman Sealy of the Shoreham rendezvous, whom they one day caught unawares.

The surprise tactics of the gang of course varied according to circumstances, and the form they took was sometimes highly ingenious. A not uncommon stratagem was the impersonation of a recruiting party beating up for volunteers. With cockades in their hats, drums rolling and fifes shrilling, the gangsmen, who of course had their arms concealed, marched ostentatiously through the high street of some sizable country town and so into the market place. Since nobody had anything to fear from a harmless recruiting party people turned out in strength to see the sight and listen to the music. When they had in this way drawn as many as they could into the open the gangsmen suddenly threw off their disguise and seized every pressable person they could lay hands on. Market day was ill adapted to these tactics. It brought too big a crowd together.

A similar ruse was once practised with great success upon the inhabitants of Portsmouth by Capt. Bowen of the Dreadnought, in connection with a general press which the Admiralty had secretly ordered to be made in and about that town. Dockyard towns were not as a rule considered good pressing grounds because of the drain of men set up by the ships of war fitting out there, but Bowen had certainly no reason to subscribe to that opinion. Late on the night of March 8, 1803, he landed a company of marines at Gosport for the purpose, as it was given out, of suppressing a mutiny at Fort Monckton. The news spread rapidly, drawing crowds of people from their homes in anticipation of an exciting scrimmage. This gave Bowen the opportunity he counted upon. When the throngs had crossed Haslar bridge he posted marines at the bridge end, and as the disappointed people came pouring back the "jollies" pressed every man in the crowd. Five hundred are said to have been taken on this occasion, but as the nature of the service forbade discrimination at the moment of pressing nearly one-half were next day discharged as unfit or exempt.

Hunting the sailor was largely a matter of information, and unfortunately for his chances of escape informers were seldom wanting. Everywhere it was a game of hide and seek. Constables had orders to report him. Chapmen, drovers and soldiers, persons who were much on the road, kept a bright lookout for him. The crimp, habitually given to underhand practices, turned informer when prices for seamen ruled low in the service he usually catered for. His mistress loved him as long as his money lasted; when he had no more to throw away upon her she perfidiously betrayed him. And for all this there was a reason as simple as casting up the number of shillings in the pound. No matter how penniless the sailor himself might be he was always worth that sum at the rendezvous. Twenty shillings was the reward paid for information leading to his apprehension as a straggler or a skulker and it was largely on the strength of such informations and often under the personal guidance of such detestable informers that the gang went a hunting.

Apart from greed of gain the motive most commonly underlying informations was either jealousy or spite. Women were the greatest sinners in the first respect. Let the sailorman concealed by a woman only so much as look with favor upon another and his fate was sealed. She gave him away or, what was more profitable, sold him without regret. There were as good fish in the sea as ever came out. Perhaps better.

On the wings of spite and malice the escapades of youth often came home to roost after many years. Men who had run away to sea as lads, but had afterward married and settled down, were informed on by evil disposed persons who bore them some grudge, and torn from their families as having used the sea. Stephen Kemp of Warbelton in Sussex, one of the many who suffered this fate, had indeed used the sea, but only for a single night on board a fishing boat.

In face of these infamies it is good to read of how they dealt with informers at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. There the role was one fraught with peculiar danger. Rewards were paid by the Collector of Customs and when a Newcastle man went to the customs house to claim the price of some sailor's betrayal the people set upon him and incontinently broke his head. One notorious receiver of such rewards was "nearly murther'd." Thereafter informers had to be paid in private places for fear of the mob, and so many persons fell under suspicion of playing the dastardly game that the regulating captain was besieged by applicants for "certificates of innocency."

Seizing a waterman on Tower Hill on the morning of his wedding day.